

Gender Dimension of Sufi Thought in Medieval India: A Study

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Abstract: Sufism represents the inward side of Islam it may for the sake of convenience, be described as the mystical dimension of Islam. The Sufis trace the beginning of their spiritual activities from Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who is believed to be the first Sufi who guided the believers through his lifestyle of poverty, generosity and simplicity. Mothers, wives and daughters of Sufi masters are sought for guidance even by masters. Prophet's influential wives Khadija, Zainab and Ayesha supported him when he faced stiff opposition and danger to his life. It was through these wives that personal facts of the Prophet's life became known to public at large. Sufism are not gender biased, women are given equal importance as their male counterparts. Karamat (Miracles) many Sufi saints had mothers who could perform miracles and Guide their sons on spiritual path. Nizam-ud-din-Auliya visited his mother Bibi-Zulaikhas tomb whenever he was in spiritual dilemma for guidance. Farid -ud din Ganj I shaker treated his mother Bibi Qarasum Masuma as his teacher. The dominant role played by women in this Indian folk Islam cannot be underestimated as women were allowed to enter even the inner circle of a Sufi followers. The present study is basically an effort to find some perception of the female Sufis the medieval Indian society. This paper also deal with eminent Sufis of the sultanate period and their views, attitude towards the women folk culture and their views regarding marriage and celibacy and collection of biographies of the women Sufi saints of the sultanate period.

Key Words: Women, Sufism, Sufis wife, Sufis mother, Sufis daughter, Gender

I. Introduction

The beginning of the twelve or thirteenth century, saw the establishment of Sufi orders in India. The Sufi saints participated in the overall development of the society. They played important part in molding the attitude and activities of the people and their khanqah was the place where people of all sorts assembled. Women as society members and men's life partner have played a major role in the development of Sufism. Although their role has been minor as compared to that of men but their attitude towards and treatment with Sufism has had a considerable impact on its history. Despite their primary role in the family as a wife and mother they were aware of the fact that Sufism is a trend which may create an eye-catching history of its own. Therefore they managed to set aside the limits imposed on them by the society and played a major role in Sufism in various ways. Talking part in Sufis sessions, narrating their miraculous actions, affecting them and even opposing their views.

The original Persian, Urdu sources consulted are Fawaid-ul-Fuad of Amir Hasan Sijzi, Khair-ul-Majalis of Hamid Qalandar, Siyar-ul-Auliya of Sayyad Mohammad Kirmani known as Mir Khurd, Siyar-ul-Afrin of Shaikh Jameli, and Akhbar-ul-Akhyar of Abdul Haqq Muhaddis. None of these Sufi literatures is devoid of the sayings of the Sufi saints for women. By the means of Khair-ul-Majalis we come to know the method of initiation of female as disciple in Sufi order by the famous saint Nasiruddin Chiragh Dehalvi.

II. Sufism and Folk Culture

As preservers of Sufi knowledge and as composers of biographies, and composers and preservers of songs and narration's, and as caretakers of tombs of famous sheikhs given by Sufi has been preserved largely by women through folk songs. Several women across culture have practiced spirituality by singing songs containing the teachings of local Sufis who inspired them to lead cleaner and religious lives. It is referred to as Sufiana Kalām. Similar songs were sung by men in the form of Qawwali. Songs sung by them was known as **Chakki Nama, Charkha Nama, Luri Nama, and Shadi Nama**. While Chakki means grinding, Charkhi means spinning. Similarly luri is lullabies and Shadi refers to marriages. These songs were related to domestic activities generally involving women like grinding, spinning and rocking their children to sleep. Through such

daily activities they conveyed the teaching of the Sufi and practiced it well. This was how the common women benefitted from associating with Sufis. The bulk of folk poetry written by Sufis was sung by village women while engaged in various household works. The most common types included the Chakki nama, so called because it was sung while grinding food grains at the Chakki.

III. Gender Dimension of Sufi Thought

A woman approached to Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya and she was initiated among his murids by the way of baiat. Initially, there were two disciples in the basis of sex. Similar restriction was placed on both men and women. service of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya . Both men and women could perform chillah in the khanqah of Sufi saints. Once a man wished to perform chillah in the guidance of khwaja Zikrullah, the saint explains him the difference of method of performing chillah by male and female. The process was easy for females and more rigorous for males. Like Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya, his chief successor Shaikh Nasiruddin Chirag Dehlvi treated men and women on equal plane. It is said that the Shaikh used to give his prayer carpet to the person whom he found sincere in matters of religion. Both men and women received this favour from him. Before his death, he is reported to have distributed the relics that he possessed among his four disciples, one of whom was a woman disciples. In Jamatkhana of Baba Farid no distinction was made between man and women on any ground as in his eyes all human being were equal.

IV. Degrees of Spiritual Authority: A Tripartite Concept of Pir-Hood

First, biographical and didactic literature produced by Sufi masters and their followers, women had, in rare cases, been acknowledged as shaikhs, pirs, and sajjada nishin. Their appointment as such sometimes coincided with an absence of suitable male candidates. In a few cases, they gained renown as shaikhs because of the depth of their knowledge of the inner and outer meanings of Islamic doctrine and practice, but were never formally appointed as such, even though contemporary Sufi masters praised their spiritual prowess. Second, according to the Chishti, Naqshbandi, and Firdausi Sufis interviewed for this study, women could exercise spiritual authority as Khalifas, or delegates, appointed by their pirs. Third, as ethnographic and anthropological studies have demonstrated, some women who are considered saintly or spiritually powerful operate as de facto pirs. They tend to work in limited, local settings. In all three roles, women's ability to exercise spiritual authority in the Sufi milieu is conditioned by concepts of sainthood that draw from Sufi, Islamic, and locally configured frames of reference.

V. Women as Shaikh, Pirs and Sajjada Nishin

Ruth Roded's work on women in Islamic biographical collections suggests that female shaikhs did not officially assume the leadership of Sufi orders per se, but rather, led Sufi centers, organized prayers, Qur'anic recitations and communal assemblies (such as zikr, or the ritualized repetition of the names of God), and instructed and preached to residents of Sufi hospices. There is evidence for this being the case in some of the widowed daughters, wives, sisters, or disciples of deceased shaikhs. Some female shaikhs or pirs, like Bon Bibi of Bengal, represent semi-mythical figures around whose shrines cults have arisen, others are so dubbed because of the high degree of their spiritual knowledge and piety. The Firdausi biography, *Mirat ul-kaunain*, names one woman, Bibi Maimuna, who achieved renown as a hafiz, or one who has memorized the entire Qur'an, among a list of six "shaikhs of Islam in India. Sharaf ud-din Maneri himself referred to a saintly woman who was so great, and had received so many spiritual benefits, that she was called a shaikh. Amit Dey's study of sufism in India refers to one pirani named Hazrat Sayyida Janab Khatun of Bengal, popularly known as Raushan Bibi.

VI. Limitation for Women is Sufism in Medieval India

The literature about the saints of Islam appears to confirm the understanding of sufi sources in Bihar and Ajmer that the role of Khalifa rather than that of Shaikh, is more appropriately open to women. The name of Bibi Hafiz Jamal, Daughter of Khwaja Muin ud din Chisti, appears in the fourteenth century Tazkira or biographical work, *Dalil ul -arfin* , ilah Diya chisti, Usmani's *Sair ul- aqtab* (1647), and the more recent *Bazm -i - sufiya* (1970) . In all three manuscripts she is mentioned as the sole women among her father's forty Khaifas . She is also identify as a Khalifa in tow other sources for the life of Muin -ud -din Chisti ' *Mirat -ul - asrar* (1654), and *Khazinat ul -asafiya* (1865). According to some scholars, Bibi Hafiz Jamal was one of the few Sufi women authorised to make disciples .On the other hand a letter written by the fifteenth century Chisti Master Hazrat Abdul ul -Quddus Gangohi to his

female disciple Bubu (Elder sister) Islam khatun, suggests that the formal appointment of women as spiritual guides was sometime problematic. In the early period women did succeed men as spiritual guides or as Sheikhs, we do not find them in such positions for the large part of the historical period. Baba Farid wants to declared his widowed daughter as his spiritual successor but could not do so women as Khalifa. Other than the famous and enlightened female Sufi, the presence of other women was not even acknowledged.

VII. Conclusion

The role of women in the development of Sufism has not been bound to turning to it but women as wives, sisters, mothers and daughters assisted men and their comments and behaviour had a considerable impact on them. Such women helped their husband in training their children and also bearing the responsibilities of the family during the time they were devoted to long worships and asceticism. Such actions on the part of women were a clear sign of their sacrifice in this realm. However, there were few women who complained about their husband's actions but as it was said they were very few. Sufis often left their family alone to perform the acts of worshipping not caring for their family members. It has to be noted that women never committed blind obedience to Sufis yet they turned to Sufism wilfully.

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